

Lister Sinclair

Good evening, and welcome to *Ideas*. I'm Lister Sinclair, and this is Part Thirteen of "The Education Debates" by David Cayley. Previous episodes have been largely concerned with schools; tonight the focus shifts to universities. In the period since World War Two, Canada has been engaged in an unprecedented experiment: the extension of post-secondary education in colleges and universities to a majority of its population. Governments at all levels have expressed their belief that universities are a powerful engine of prosperity, and this belief has produced a tidal wave of new universities, new students, and new academic programs. Behind this have come second thoughts. There are fears that standards have fallen, that the university, in its rush to economic and social relevance, has lost its independence, that corporate influence is now "seeping into the university like swamp gas," as one University of Toronto professor recently told CBC Radio. These fears, and the hopes of which they are the shadow, are our subject in this program, Part Thirteen of "The Education Debates" by David Cayley.

David Cayley

Universities were once a world with which most Canadians had very little contact. As recently as 1954, there were only 70,000 university students in the entire country. Eight years later the number had doubled. By 1968, it had doubled again. A brief pause, and then enrollments continued their climb during the 1980's. By the time York University's Seth Feldman totaled the numbers up for *Ideas* a few years ago, there were over 900,000 students attending university on at least a part-time basis.

That such explosive growth has transformed the institution is clear. Into what is not as certain. Tonight's program presents several views of the condition of the Canadian university today. The first, and bluntest opinion comes from Jack Granatstein who says that what Canadian universities have become is appallingly mediocre. Granatstein is now retired from academic life after a thirty-year career as a professor of history at York University. In 1984 he teamed up with his friends and fellow historians Robert Bothwell and David Bercuson to produce a polemic on the unhealthy state of Canadian higher education called The Great Brain Robbery. A sequel called The Petrified Campus was published in 1997. In both books, Granatstein and his co-authors analyze the underlying problems that they think keep the Canadian university in a state of frozen mediocrity. The first, Granatstein says, is the professoriate's guarantee of lifetime employment, the right of tenure.

Jack Granatstein

We all thought that tenure was something we wanted to get when we started out. I can remember the trouble I had getting tenure in 1970 with one senior member of my department arguing 'Oh, he's published too much. We shouldn't give him tenure.' And I thought this was a very strange sort of argument. But I got it anyhow, as did everyone. In fact, in my experience 99% of faculty got tenure. You put people through terrible

hoops, but you didn't send them away, whether they were good, bad or indifferent. You simply gave everyone tenure. And that struck me at the time as being a huge amount of work for no purpose. But then I realized it did have a purpose. Its purpose was essentially to guarantee that fresh ideas didn't come into the university, that people would have job security for their lives, that they would be able to do nothing. And as I looked around the universities I became more and more convinced, as did my colleagues in that book, that the universities were full of people who had stopped thinking, stopped teaching, stopped writing, stopped doing any administrative work. They simply turned up, droned through their classes, did the minimum number of hours of office time and went home and had a really quite nice life with a tolerable salary with three and a half months off in the summer and it was really very pleasant. And by 1984 when Brain Robbery came out we were already in a period when there were huge numbers of Ph.D.s unable to get jobs. We looked around and we said you know, Joe Dokes over there has just got his Ph.D. and he's brilliant and here we have Tom Smith in the department and he's a dolt. Why can't we get rid of Tom Smith and hire Joe Dokes? Oh, you can't do that! Smith has tenure. It would be terribly upsetting if we tried to fire him and the administration wouldn't do anything about it. He can't find his way to the washroom without help, but even so he's here for the next thirty years. And increasingly this was starting to drive all of us nuts, as we turned out Ph.D.s by the bushel load knowing there were no jobs for them, turned them out at public expense knowing there were no jobs for them. The whole system was crazy and it needed and still needs a major overhaul of the contractual basis on which faculty work. Very simply, I was made a tenured associate professor in 1970. Had I not applied for promotion to full professor half a dozen years later, I could have gone through an entire lifetime of teaching after 1970, which in my case would have run to 2004 if I hadn't taken early retirement, without ever being seriously assessed again. And that's not just York University. That's every university. Sure, someone might come into my class every once in a while to hear me teach. Sure, student assessments would be done each year, but even if they were devastatingly bad no one would do anything. No one would make me serve on any committees. No one cared whether I published or not. There isn't much in the way of merit pay left in the universities these days, so you don't get any benefit by working hard. You don't lose much by not working hard. It's just a crazy system.

David Cayley

What about the reasons for which tenure is ostensibly there?

Jack Granatstein

Tenure is supposed to protect academic freedom, to protect the right of faculty to speak out fearlessly on all issues, which God knows I believe in. I think faculty should do that. The fact is that 90% of faculty never speak out on any issues, have no ideas, don't challenge the conventional wisdom and, if they publish at all, they publish unreadable stuff that does nothing, in 99 out of a hundred cases, but uphold either the ideological

position of their department or the status quo in society, both of which are rigid, intractable positions. So I don't frankly think that one needs to worry about protecting academic freedom for most faculty. And for the ones who are troublemakers there are enough protections now, I believe, in the Charter, in various human rights legislations, in guarantees of freedom of speech, in union contracts and others to effectively eliminate the need for tenure.

David Cayley

The second thing Jack Granatstein believes is keeping Canadian universities mediocre is faculty unionism. Originally a backer of the idea, he now believes that it has made the faculty easier for the administration to manage and increased the influence of the same time-servers who benefit from tenure.

Jack Granatstein

I was president of the Faculty Association at York when we unionized so I was a supporter. I thought what it would do was end the special deals, the sweetheart deals that characterized the university, that it would regularize things. The reason I supported unionization is that I grieved the denial to me of merit by my chairman. I had published three books in the last couple of years and I was told I wasn't going to get merit because merit was going to go to the people with the lowest paid salaries and therefore I wasn't going to get it because I was just above the cut off point. And I thought, this is not how merit is supposed to be. So I grieved and my grievance went up to the president and was turned down. This was informal. Then I grieved formally, went through the same people and was turned down again and I thought, this is crazy. So I formed the union because I wanted regularized procedures, because I thought it was important that merit pay should go to the people who were meritorious, not the people who were lowest paid, because I thought it would regularize the processes in which we worked. We had a long struggle at York and a union took shape by 1975, 1976 and it did in fact regularize those procedures.

The problem was, and I have to admit that I stupidly failed to realize this, that once I was finished organizing the union I said thank you very much and I'll go back and write my books. And the people who took over the union at York and at every other university that unionized, were the tenured assistant professors who were very keen on the union because what it meant was that they wouldn't be fired for their incompetence. And the unions ended up being run by the least competent members of the universities, the people who published nothing, in most cases taught not very well, but had endless amounts of time to spend in meetings and who could rule, as I thought of it, with their iron bums, who could sit in a meeting longer than anyone else and therefore they could get their way in the final analysis. And that's basically what happened to the unions. They all turned into protecting the least competent. I had assumed stupidly, that unions could be a device to improve the faculty. It turned out to be exactly the reverse and although I think there is some good that came out of that process, in that regularization.

I don't think, overall, it served the purposes of education in Canada.

David Cayley

The third item in Jack Granatstein's indictment is what he and his co-authors in The Petrified Campus call "the collapse of standards." They attribute this in part to the rapid expansion of Canadian Universities. Once new places had been created, they had to be kept filled in order to fund fixed overheads. If enrolments declined, as they tended to do once the great demographic bulge produced by the Baby Boom began to tail off, admission requirements had to be lowered in order to keep enrolments up. In consequence, Granatstein says, universities have lowered their expectations of students and devalued a university degree.

Jack Granatstein

My concern is that we have been watering down the standards so much that in fact, what we are doing is a pretense of educating. What's my evidence? Teaching in the system for 30 years, having friends across the country who do the same thing in different parts of the country, watching the quality of students deteriorate. Not their grades...their high school leaving grades go up endlessly, but they can neither read, nor write, nor speak clearly, nor think. The decline in standards and the quality of work submitted over the time I've been teaching is catastrophic. The decline has been very marked in the areas of literacy, general knowledge, the ability to read and understand difficult texts and the ability to speak clearly. If I had a dime for every student I have who answered a question with 'Well, like, you know what I mean sir, like, yeah.' And that passes as public speech in our university system and you get the equivalent of that in prose. You get graduating students, you get graduate students who cannot write a simple paragraph in history courses, where the assumption is that you are able to read and write. It's staggering. But, that in fact, is now almost the norm.

David Cayley

And are you convinced that this is an educational failure?

Jack Granatstein

There is no shortage of bright kids. I don't think for a minute that all of a sudden all of Canada's children became stupid. There are as many bright kids as there ever were. What has gone wrong clearly, is the way they're taught in the schools, in the public schools and the high schools. Despite the failures in the public and high schools, kids still emerge exceedingly bright and in many cases extremely literate, and then we throw them into multiversity X where they're surrounded by all the dullards they were surrounded with in high school. Is it any surprise the bright students drop out? There is in fact some evidence showing that the students who come into university with the scholarships drop out at a higher rate than those who come without them because they're bored by university. They had assumed university would be a change from the dreariness of high school. Instead they find out it is more of the same, with the same

people around them. Well, if we had a few elite universities, those kids would have a good place to go to.

David Cayley

Developing a few elite universities is Jack Granatstein's proposal for university reform in a nutshell. Such universities in his view would be distinguished, first of all, by the published scholarship of their faculties, and second by the intellectual caliber of the students such scholarship would attract. Bringing these elite institutions into being, he says, will demand public policy that recognizes a hierarchy of university types and funds them accordingly. These types would range from big general access teaching-oriented institutions through a variety of more specialized schools, up to the handful of favoured research universities that he would like to see emerge at the top of the heap. In The Petrified Campus, Granatstein and his co-authors point to signs that this more variegated system is beginning to emerge. During the last three years for example, the University of Toronto has been able to trade on its history, its reputation, its moneyed alumni and its position close to the centres of economic power to attract \$350 million in private donations. Such a sum, unthinkable for most other Canadian universities will help Toronto attract scholars of high reputation and so augment its elite status. But this tendency to differentiation, Granatstein argues, is still being held back by public policy that puts quantity ahead of quality.

Jack Granatstein

I am convinced our universities are in very serious trouble because we have decided that the purpose of a university is accessibility. The important thing is to let as many people as possible get a university experience and a degree. In principle that is not a bad thing, so long as there is differentiation among universities, so long as there is still a place where someone can go knowing that they will get an absolutely first class education with first class faculty teaching and where they will be surrounded by first class students. The problem in Canada is that we have never been able to deal with elitism versus accessibility. We have become convinced that elitism is a bad thing, that elites are by definition corrupt, evil, nasty, rotten and should be stomped on. The result is that our universities are anti-elitist, that our universities are open to all and there is not, in my view, a single university that offers a first class education across the boards. There is nothing in Canada like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Oberlin, Reed to name a few American examples. In Canada, King's College or UQUAM or Toronto or Laurentian or Lethbridge, or UNBC are all the same. Now that exaggerates slightly, but not very much. I think we've reached the point where Toronto is moving ahead again and clearly becoming the number one university in the country, but where everything else is very much of a muchness and I think this is a disaster for the country. What we're doing is squandering the best brains in our society and I think people in fact, are realizing that. When I was a kid, it was an article of faith that Canadian schools were better than American. We meant that at every level, from public school to university. I don't think we believe that today. I think the simple truth is that those who can afford it, in this

country, send their children to American schools. And when I see faculty doing that in our universities...

David Cayley

Which you do?

Jack Granatstein

Which I do, and when I see university presidents doing this, which I do, then by God, you know that even the people teaching in our universities know that there's a fraud being perpetrated. The simple truth is that you can get a good education in a Canadian university if you know what you're doing, if you pick your courses well and if you work hard, but it's much easier to get a good education by going to an American school with real standards and good faculty and good students. We somehow have fallen into the pit of assuming that a degree from Laurentian is the equivalent of a degree from Toronto is the equivalent of a degree from Laval. Well, unfortunately it really has become that. And that's not the way a good university system should work. Have accessibility by all means. Have a variety of universities that cater to the mediocre students who can't get into the good schools. There's nothing wrong with doing that, but you have to have, and we don't have, first class universities that let in only the very best students and offer the very best education.

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David Cayley

The expansion of the Canadian university system was financed almost entirely by governments. At the time the growth began, universities recovered the majority of their costs from tuition and endowments. By the time it was over there were some among the new universities that received as much as 90% of their revenues from government. Then, during the 1980's, the trend reversed, and public funding began to decline substantially. Austerity, tuition increases, and private donations have made up the difference. The change has become increasingly evident during the 90's. Universities compete more than they used to, market themselves more brazenly than they used to, fund-raise more than they used to, and sell soft-drink manufacturers exclusive access to their students more than they used to. Governments, in this new climate, have also begun to demand more of universities. As Ontario Premier Mike Harris said recently, they want good value for their investment, which entails, in his words, "a fast-tracking of decisions that will provide for more programs of relevance." Now, if you are of Jack Granatstein's view and believe that indiscriminate government support has been one of the downfalls of the Canadian university, this trend is not entirely a bad thing. A more competitive, more accountable system could well foster the emergence of the elite institutions he thinks the country deserves. But for those who fear the growing corporate influence on university education, recent developments are more worrying.

Paul Axelrod is an historian of education and a professor at York University. His 1982

book Scholars and Dollars, examines shifting perceptions of the economic importance of universities in Ontario between the 1960's and 1980's. Universities, he says, have always been seen as economically significant - as early as 1906, a Royal Commission on the University of Toronto noted that the institution was "intimately associated with the material interests of the country" - but lately this significance has come to be seen in much narrower terms.

Paul Axelrod

When the universities expanded in the post World War Two period, from 1945 on, if you include the post war veterans, right up until, say, 1970 when the major form of expansion occurred, there certainly was a perception of the economic value of universities. They were seen to be serving the community for reasons of the productivity of the people who came out and the job placement that took place. But the perception was somewhat different than now, and I think it was much healthier. It may have been healthier because the economy was healthier, but the theory of human capital was, that any investment we make in education, wherever we put it, will produce returns, because we're enriching the nation's intellectual capital. And everybody benefited from that, the liberal arts, and the professions and the sciences all prospered in that period. So the link between education and the labour market was there, but it embraced a broad view of what kind of education would be valuable. We're now in a period that has been marked by the deficit battles, the emerging globalization phenomenon and the perception that we all have to be competitive. It's the law of the economic jungle that has embraced all of us and what I think is interesting is that nobody seems to think there's a choice. We don't have a choice any more. We are caught up in this. We have to move in that direction. I think Linda McQuaig called this the cult of impotence. I think that's a useful, if unusual way to look at it because it's as though nobody is deciding. This is all just happening to us and we'd better get on the bandwagon. What that means in terms of universities and the labour market is that, given the uncertainties of the economy, we'd better start skewing the kind of investment we make in education, and start valuing only those things that seem to produce direct economic returns. That gets translated into support for those parts of the economy that seem to be growing, like computer science and biotechnology. And that's where the money is going to go. An example of this? The Ontario government has said to the universities, if you increase the enrolments in computer science and other applied fields X amount over three years you'll get extra funding, so long as you match it with private sector funding. So if they increase their enrolments and then go out and get the private money, they'll also get more government money. That just skews what the universities do. So there is this problem of what's given a higher priority. Business used to give money generally to universities when they donated. Now increasingly, my impression is that it's much more targeted to the things that are perceived to be economically valuable. And that leaves us with the problem that certain types of education are being highlighted, even though labour market demand in those fields may be a short-term phenomenon. Engineers have not always done well in the labour market. Demand

goes up and down. It's the same for computer scientists. That could change in a few years. The universities are not going to be able to anticipate every market niche need. They can't build their academic programs that way. They have to provide quality education in a whole variety of fields that include the liberal arts.

David Cayley

The change Paul Axelrod is talking about in how the economic significance of education is conceived can be traced in the pronouncements of Ontario's political leaders. When Premier John Robarts stated in 1965 that the province's true wealth lay in an educated citizenry, he still saw education as producing a general economic buoyancy. Thirty years later, when Premier Mike Harris addressed the question of university education, he complained that Ontario universities graduate students in fields that do not directly connect with available jobs. Geography and sociology were his examples. To him the university had become a place to train for a specific, preplanned career. This new attitude began to be evident, Axelrod says, during the 1980's.

Paul Axelrod

Policies were developed which made public grants for research, in particular, increasingly conditional. They set up centres of excellence all over the country, both federally and provincially, and for the most part these were seen as a way to reward people doing research in areas of high technology or the work force, and not only in the sciences, but in the social sciences too. You have strategic grants in the social sciences, again targeted towards particular policy areas that stress the importance of the link between education and the labour market. And we have now, in addition to that, governments being much more interventionist in the running of universities, shrinking the autonomy of the institution. So now the big rage is performance indicators. The language of the marketplace has come into the institution. What this means is that, and this is happening in Alberta and now in Ontario, universities have to justify what they do on the basis, for example, of how many students in programs get jobs. And if they don't apparently show well in that scale, then that will affect the funding that they get next year. Accountability has become an issue. This means answering to governments on grounds of efficient use of resources, but it comes in the wake of universities having already become efficient. They haven't had enough money, and this started in the late '70s but continued through the '80s and '90s, to replace all people who retire, so they have replaced them with part-time instead of full time faculty. The percentage of part-time faculty has gone up and they're hired because they're cheap. And if that isn't an efficient use of your resources, tell me what is. It isn't necessarily good for the pedagogy, or the lives of faculty who are hired in that capacity, but all of these other things from the marketplace have come in the wake of the assumption that universities have been wasting all these resources. I think what's different now is not only the lack of resources, but the conditional distribution of them and the intervention of government in ways that rob universities of the autonomy that would allow them to do things more broadly and with greater diversity, the autonomy

they had for that period from the end of the Second World War to the 1970s.

David Cayley

This incipient loss of independence is Paul Axelrod's greatest fear for the institution in which he has spent his life. If the utilitarian view of the university as a mere cog in the wheel of the global economy should triumph, he says, society will lose something unique.

Paul Axelrod

There isn't another institution in society whose core is the unregulated search for knowledge, that thrives from the engagement with ideas, but I think the space for that is shrinking in the institution now. The utilitarian thrust is, I think, stronger than ever. Public funding of autonomous institutions has been, in Canada, the bulwark against utilitarian thinking. It has given universities the resources and the space to engage people with ideas. But I think that we may be moving farther down the utilitarian road. I'm afraid that some time in the early 21st century we're going to wake up one day and be not quite sure how it happened but we're going to have an educational system from primary school up to higher education that we won't even recognize. It's going to look like something designed by General Motors.

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David Cayley

Education, in the contemporary world, is intimately associated with work. It is one of the largest employers in a modern economy; it's considered a necessary preparation for employment for the rest of the citizens, and I think that it's probably fair to say that it's regarded as a form of work by the majority of its students. Under these circumstances it's easy to forget that the pursuits from which our idea of education derives were originally thought to be the opposite of work. Aristotle, in his Politics, defines what we would now call education as the occupation of leisure, *scholē*, the root of our word school. For him it is what people do when they are free of the burden of servile work and able to contemplate nature without any desire to use or alter it. From Aristotle there descends a long tradition which distinguishes the liberal from the mechanical arts, separating those things that we do freely and for their own sake from those things that we have to do to live. The university was one of the places where such free and disinterested pursuits were supposed to be carried on. Today, when the university's proudest boast is its economic dynamism, the idea of education as a leisured pursuit may seem tenuous and antique. And yet, there are still those who think it provides whatever vestiges of a soul the university still possesses.

Michael Higgins is the President-elect of St. Jerome's, a Roman Catholic college within the University of Waterloo, where he has been the vice-president and academic dean for a number of years. Like Paul Axelrod, he has watched a more and more utilitarian ethos take over his university in recent years. He says that there has been some good

in the university's becoming more involved with Canadian society, but he thinks that what has tended to get lost in the process is what Cardinal John Henry Newman, writing in the 19th century, called "the idea of a university."

Michael Higgins

Newman reflected on the fact that the university shouldn't be a treadmill, shouldn't be a mint, and shouldn't be a foundry. It's an alma mater. It's a place where you're nurtured. It's a place where the mind is allowed to be free. It's a place where the soul is cultivated. It's a place, in a real sense, of sanctuary. We have very few places of sanctuary in North American life and it seems to me that on one level we recognize this and we yearn for it. Retreat houses and centres of spirituality are inundated by people who need quiet time, who need reflective time, who need to disengage in order to engage. But the thing is that in many ways that's what the university did and that's what the university should do. That's why I use that term, sanctuary, because it seems to me that it shouldn't be cut off, David, from its religious roots. The university, in its Western form at least, has profoundly religious roots and it seems to me that the more we distance ourselves from them, the more seriously we depart from its original mandate or purpose. Now I don't mean that we have to re-Christianize all the universities that have been secularized. I'm not saying that in the least. What I am saying is that we need a component of that, the contemplative component, an attention to ideas as the stuff that helps define the divinity of human kind. We are a thinking species, and ideas aren't just simply a luxury, a decoration, something to be employed at maximum marketing warp speed in order to achieve success, but in fact are something that humanizes us, something that brings us into encounter with God or with the transcendent in a meaningful way. And so the contemplative component of university education seems to me absolutely critical. I obviously sound like a museum piece talking about these things, but I think, that if the university is to be the kind of place where leisure, which we often think of as simply inactivity, a kind of useless non-time, is allowed to be what it is, a nurturing ground for us to be fully human, then the university has to be at the heart of this and the university has to be involved not only in the cultivation of leisure, in the nurturing of a sacred place for leisure, but in allowing us to see that leisure and contemplation and the disinterested pursuit of ideas and the debate over ideas are collectively at the heart of what makes us human and not a decoration, not a frill, not an elitist camp.

David Cayley

Michael Higgins sees this vision of the university as increasingly threatened by the practical demands with which students now have to deal. No longer do they approach university as a period of free discovery. More often, he says, it is now the intensively planned first stage of a career.

Michael Higgins

Students identify courses that they should take or must take or programs that they take

because they're courses that are going to guarantee them jobs. They're under pressure from their parents, and indeed from their banks and from their friends, to take courses, to take programs, indeed to take degrees that will guarantee them an entree into the market, or at least a competitive position. If they take courses in the traditional humanities, they have no such automatic guarantee, and many of them who would have been drawn to the humanities in the past, now take courses of secondary interest to them intellectually but primary interest in terms of their vocation. We hitherto had seen the university experience as an important transition stage in one's maturing. We saw the university as a place where ideas are jostled with, ideas are invented, ideas are debated, ideas are throttled, all kinds of things happen and you have the freedom and the time to do that. And I think if you look at the average Canadian university student now you will not see that kind of attitude toward the university. You will see that, "Well this is where I go because I've got to get this in order to get that." And as I say, this has been happening for some time, but its utilitarian face now is the strongest it's ever been.

David Cayley

One of the casualties of this new utilitarian ethos, in Michael Higgins view, has been the relationship of student to teacher. Contact is limited by the hectic pace of student life and by the contemporary student's image of himself or herself as a client rather than an acolyte. Teachers, for their part, fear that familiarity might be misconstrued. The result, Higgins says, is generally more distant relations.

Michael Higgins

I was driving into Toronto with my daughter who was going to be taking a couple of classes next year and she was saying "Oh, if I take two classes with this professor then maybe there will be somebody here who will remember my name, who will know my name." And that is not uncommon, where the students simply feel unconnected with the professor. And it's not necessarily that the professor has been indifferent to this need. It's just simply that the structure doesn't make it possible in many ways. The nature of their programs now and the capacity of the university to deliver on those programs, and to provide the kinds of courses that are in high demand and are therefore high enrollment courses and are dependent on graduate assistants or increasingly dependent on sessional lecturers, all contributes to the unwinding of a kind of a special bond that should exist between an instructor and a student, between a tutor and a student, a very important bond. And the difficulties surrounding this have been further exacerbated by the whole issue of harassment, sexual grievance and abuse. As associate dean and latterly as dean, I have been involved in many of these cases and their resolution, and I think it is good that this issue blew open. It was a justice issue. It is being faced in the university, with candor, not always consistently and not always convincingly, but I think by and large with candor and with a genuine concern. But one of the negative implications of this is in an almost enervating or petrifying timidity in terms of the relationship that students have with the professor or the professor with the

students. Professors always keep their doors open all the time now. Students are reluctant to come to a professor and have their intentions misunderstood. Professors are fearful that anything they say, unless sufficiently nuanced, may be misconstrued and used against them. All this creates, if not a debilitating climate of fear, at least it has the potential, and the reality in some cases clearly, of subduing the passion for learning and the need indeed for honest exchange. There is a pastoral role that a professor should play, has traditionally played, in which he or she has been concerned not just with this student's subject, but also with the whole student and that has been fractured.

David Cayley

Student life, as Michael Higgins sees it, is far more dominated by immediate, practical considerations than it once was. Studies that seem to offer no practical benefit tend to be pushed to the margins. The problem with this for Higgins is that many pursuits that might seem useless in a short-term economic sense are, in a longer view, vital to the existence of a free society. What will ultimately prove beneficial, he says, is not necessarily what will guarantee immediate employment.

Michael Higgins

The pressure is on the cultivation of those skills that are marketable. You don't want somebody coming out with a degree in Aristotelian metaphysics. But in an important way, the people who are the metaphysicians or the epistemologists or the specialists in old English, are in many ways precisely the ones we want to be educated for the future. They're the ones we want to be able to make discerning judgements, to understand the past, to be discriminating, to understand the implications of things that are not visible and palpable and tangible and immediate, things that are not driven by the kind of ephemeral mystique we associate with the media, but who are, in important ways, able to dissect and to analyze. In many ways the traditional humanities, philosophy, English literature, religious studies and whatnot did precisely that. They trained or educated one to dissect, to analyze the text, to engage with ideas, not to be deceived, to be skeptical, to be scrupulous in the use of words and to know something about their etymology. Those skills are critical to a free society and the development of utilitarian habits and skills may not be. I'm often reminded that when a fascist regime or totalitarian regime takes over it is not the engineers and the dentists and the cardiologists that they arrest. It's the writers, the thinkers, the poets. They're the ones they go for first, because they're the ones who threaten any kind of regime that understands freedom as a potent force for dissolving control. And writers, poets, artists, they're at the heart of this and students who study them are at the heart of that tradition. So I think that in what I said earlier about the university being a sanctuary, I wasn't being glib, David, by suggesting this kind of sacred role for it or historical role that makes it sound rather rarified. I was thinking it of as a guarantor of our liberty, of our real genuine freedom, that the university provides us with that place, with that context that is inviolate, that says OK, here ideas are scrupulously examined, systems

opposed, charades exposed, ideologies always suspect. This is a world that can't be bought. This isn't a world that's subservient to anything. This is a special moment, a special time for the student and for the teacher engaged in working with the student, to explore things with a kind of religious purity, a kind of innocence, not compromised by larger and external concerns, which is the world we live in. Of course, there are these things and our lives are affected by government and by commerce and by the church and by several other factors. But for that special moment, the university is sanctuary, the university is an undergraduate experience that gives them a chance to realize that thought and free thought is the ultimate guarantor of their basic freedom. It seems to me if we diminish that, if we muddy the waters, we're losing something critical to ourselves as a civilization.

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David Cayley

The word 'university' implies by its etymology, a condition of unity and of universality. This unity was provided, for the first universities and for many still, by Christianity. "All things cohere in Christ" as the motto of McMaster University says. When secular universities were created, or as often happened in Canada, when church affiliated universities transformed themselves into non-sectarian public universities, reason became their pole star and the source of their coherence. Today, after a generation in which reason has been repeatedly attacked as a disguised form of domination, the university appears to have lost its unity. There is now no test of knowledge or truth that all members of the institution will accept. Let me take an example from the pages of Bothwell, Bercuson and Granatstein's The Petrified Campus. They quote an article by Carleton University Canadian Studies professor, Jill Vickers, that appeared in a magazine called Supplement, in 1994. Professor Vickers relates a disagreement that occurred while a group of students and faculty was vetting textbooks they were using for racist or sexist bias. "An aboriginal student," she writes, "was very concerned that one of our texts taught that aboriginal peoples came to North America over the Bering Strait, from Asia." "I argued," she continues, "that it seemed to be a proven scientific fact." The student responded that aboriginal peoples believed that they had originated on this continent, that is that they were indigenous. Professor Vickers then asked whether the two positions could be taught as "parallel belief systems." This proposal, that archeological evidence and folk belief be given equal status, strikes Bothwell, Bercuson and Granatstein as, in their words "a terrifying abdication of academic responsibility" by Professor Vickers. She, apparently, considered it a way to show respect and keep the conversation going. What I see in this story is a vision of academic life without a common denominator. Professor Vickers' unwillingness to use scientific reason as a trump card, her sense that this was something to be struggled with, not definitively settled, epitomizes the non-universal university. Knowledge is seen as an effect of class, race or gender. There is no higher court to which knowledge claims may be appealed. This unmasking of reason has left the university without a common internal standard and it seems to me that this is one more way in which the

university has become subject to political influences external to its scholarly culture. The economic pressures of which Paul Axelrod and Michael Higgins spoke earlier add to its vulnerability. "The university," as the chairman of Xerox Canada has said, "is no longer sacred ground." The result is an institution that seems to be losing its independence and its distinct character.

Peter Emberley of Carleton University, has written several books on education, most recently, Zero Tolerance: Hot Button Politics in Canada's Universities, and he thinks that independence is precisely what the university can't afford to lose, if it is to fulfill its proper purpose. You will hear more on this theme from Peter Emberley in the next program of this series. He concludes tonight's program with his reflections on the danger of tying the university too tightly to the world.

Peter Emberley

I think that a lot of the reform going on today starts from the wrong end, because it starts at the end of what is the product we want, which is usually related to some vocational or professional requirement of society. And I think it's a very peculiar thing to see university education as a means to that specific kind of end, partly because you can't get the degree of certainty in university education that you can from more vocational training. I think that the kinds of very complex adventures that the university invites young people into will have conclusions which are in no ways predictable. One hopes that what really is achieved through university education is the kind of openness that leads people to realize that intellectual and spiritual searches and adventures are an essential ingredient of their humanity. And I think it's quite wrong for us to try to compress the specific ends that openness produces into the specific needs of society. A lot of the talk about re-engineering and reforming the university and the schools, making the universities and schools far more accountable to the specific immediate needs of society, is very dangerous, because I think it cuts off precisely those intellectual and spiritual experiences one wants an education to form. And I think it's also bankrupt. I think that when one examines the sorts of criteria that are being used in performance indicators, it's ultimately depriving the university of what its greatest achievements can be, which is precisely to form a human being and to cultivate a human being. I think the book that probably left the greatest impression on me and which I continue to re-read almost yearly is Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain. I think of the protagonist of the novel coming up to this tuberculosis sanatorium and the experiences he undergoes. There are various efforts by individuals whom he meets up there to form him in a certain way and to cultivate him in a certain way and there's a kind of pressure that he return to the valley or to the flat lands, as a certain type of being, able to fit into society. But through the novel, we discover that the richness of human life that he experiences up there can't be predicted or charted. To use Michael Oakeshott's wonderful term, he's sailed into this boundless sea that doesn't have a destination. But we certainly learn that he becomes the most wonderful example of what a human being is capable of doing and thinking and loving and believing. And I

think that's what the university is. It is that kind of a metamorphosis of a young person and I think the demand to somehow tie university education to a specific social need is just very narrow and very disappointing.